S
628.105
W3S
SEPTEMBER 1981

Montana State Library
3 0864 1006 7315 4

Statewide 208

NEWSLETTER

TO ACHIEVE AND PRESERVE CLEAN WATERS

September, 1981 Issue #25

FOUR DISTRICTS SIGN WATER-QUALITY PROJECT CONTRACTS

Grants totalling $103,777 have been awarded by the state Department of Health and Environmental Sciences (DHES) to four Montana conservation districts for water-quality improvement projects.

The grants, part of the Statewide 208 Water Quality Program, were given by the department's Water Quality Bureau to Lewis and Clark County, Hill County, Green Mountain and Jefferson Valley Conservation Districts.

The grants follow the submittal by most of the 57 Montana conservation districts of water-quality plans in which water-quality problems were identified and prioritized. The bureau and the Conservation Districts Division of the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) then solicited applications from the districts for funds to begin working to solve their problems. The bureau then passed on those funds--75 percent of which are provided by the Environmental Protection Agency and 25 percent by the state--to the applicants with the worst problems and the best project proposals.

The following are the projects chosen:

Lewis and Clark County Conservation District: Streambank erosion and sedimentation are major problems in Lewis and Clark County on Prickly Pear Creek, the west fork of the Dearborn River, and Ten Mile Creek. The loss of streambank vegetation is believed to be the major factor responsible for the poor bank conditions. The purpose of this contract is to provide the district with funds to conduct a stream-vegetation assessment and prepare special conservation plans to maintain or enhance riparian vegetation conditions for cooperating landowners. In addition,

The Statewide 208 Project is funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under provision of Section 208, PL 92-500 for the purposes of water quality management planning in that portion of Montana exclusive of the four designated planning districts. Project Coordinator is Kit Walther; Public Participation Coordinator is Charles Wood; Montana Water Quality Bureau; telephone (406) 449-2406.

the district will identify critical treatment areas, estimate costs of treatment and explore all sources of financial assistance to help landowners implement the conservation measures needed to maintain or improve the stream corridor. DHES is granting $45,720 for the project.

Hill County Conservation Disrict: Beaver Creek, nine miles south of Havre, flows through a 10,000-acre county park and is a popular fishery for area residents. However, fishery production is impaired by inadequte streamflow and sedimentation. It is believed that these limiting factors can be improved with an effective operational plan for Bearpaw Lake Dam, from which the creek flows. The operational plan would enhance the flows and flush harmful sediment deposits which now cover the spawning gravels of the creek. To some extent, degraded streambank vegetation, due to excessive grazing of cattle, has reduced the fish habitat. The purpose of the contract is to provide the district with the money to develop a workable operational plan for the dam and to conduct a range and riparian vegetation assessment from which the district can determine the desired changes in grazing practices needed to improve vegetation conditions. DHES is granting $20,017 for the project.

Green Mountain Conservation District: Development is on the rise in Sanders County in northwestern Montana. Subdivision, mining, tillage, utility, logging and road construction activities each have significantly increased in recent years. Without a district ordinance that establishes standards for sediment-producing activities, the Green Mountain Conservation District has found it cannot effectively control excessive erosion and sedimentation caused by poor land management practices.

The purpose of this contract is to provide the district with money to develop an ordinance and solicit public support for its adoption. The grant will enable the board of supervisors to hire, on a temporary basis, someone to research a proposed ordinance, solicit public input, conduct public hearings and arrange for a referendum vote if adequate public support is determined. DHES is granting $25,000 for the project.

Jefferson Valley Conservation District: Excessive sediment in Pipestone Creek is filling the lower stream channel and the Jefferson Slough, a brown trout spawning area, with sediment. A significant source of the sediment is believed to be two large "headcuts" and associated erosion that occur a few miles upstream from Whitehall. The district supervisors want to study the feasibility of stabilizing the two erosion sites, prepare cost estimates and develop a funding proposal for the 1983 Legislature. They also have requested that the Water Quality Bureau evaluate other sediment sources on Pipestone Creek and assist the district with identifying nonstructural measures to mitigate the high sediment loads. DHES is granting $13,040 for the project.

The DHES grants are for 90 percent of the total costs of the projects and the districts are kicking in 10 percent in money or services.

THREE OTHER PROJECTS ARE ALSO IN THE MILL

Water-quality improvement projects also have been proposed by three other conservation districts and the details are now being worked out.

Eastern Sanders Conservation District is seeking a $13,048 grant to determine proper land-use practices on Hot Springs Creek and involve landowners in implementing them (See January 1981 208 Newsletter). Park County Conservation District is trying to determine if there is enough landowner interest to initiate a stream-channel inventory on the Shields River. The district thinks timber harvesting in the upper watershed, subdivisions and grazing, have changed the river's flow regime for the worst. Missoula County Conservation District also is preparing letters to landowners to get their permission for the Water Quality Bureau to do a study of conditions on Union Creek.

Work on these three streams would be funded by Statewide 208 monies, although no direct grants are planned for Park and Missoula Counties.

HIGH NITRATE LEVELS FOUND IN RURAL WELLS

Water from wells on the Greenfield Bench near Fairfield should not be given to infants less than six months of age, the state Department of Health and Environmental Sciences has advised.

Nitrate concentrations exceed drinking water standards in about one-fourth of the 30 wells tested recently by the Water Quality Bureau. Nitrates in drinking water contribute to a blood disorder called methemoglobinemia in infants under six months old. The disorder reduces the amount of oxygen that reaches their tissue, resulting in oxygen deprivation or suffocation.

The median value of the nitrates in the 30 wells that were sampled was about 10 times the median value in public water supplies statewide. Although amounts varied from well to well and from time to time, it is advised that no well water on the Greenfield Bench be given to the infants at any time because of the unpredictable nature of the nitrate movement. A well on the bench could only be proven safe by long-term testing--say, for a year--at regular intervals that shows nitrates are consistently below the danger levels.

Elevated nitrate concentrations in groundwater often are associated with intensive farming operations, fertilizer usage and irrigation in soils that have high infiltration rates. Within the Greenfield Irrigation District, conditions leading to high-nitrate groundwaters were thought to exist and a short-term appraisal was initiated by the Water Quality Bureau in cooperation with the Cascade and Teton County Conservation Districts' Muddy Creek Water Quality Project.

MONEY FOUND TO IMPLEMENT BLUEWATER PLANS

The people working to stop the erosion on Bluewater Creek south of Billings have come up with funds from existing sources to implement the plans paid for by 208 planning monies.

The natural resources committee of the last legislature approved $121,000 in Renewable Resource Development funds for the project and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) recently approved $30,000 in Agricultural Conservation Program cost-share funds. With the landowner's contribution of $22,000 and a grant from the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks of $14,600, the Bluewater project is moving ahead full-steam.

The Carbon County Conservation District is completing the final plans and specifications for the erosion-control structures needed to halt the down-cutting of the channel. Plans and specs will soon be developed for consolidating several irrigation ditches and installing buried pipeline, all to reduce seepage of water along the creek bank. Next spring, areas along the creek will be fenced to facilitate revegetation.

If all goes according to plan, work will begin on the creek in October and the project will be completed sometime early next summer. Several biological stations also will be established instream to monitor water-quality improvements associated with the project.

SMELTER HELPS PRICKLY PEAR PROJECT ACHIEVE MAJOR GOAL

Officials of the Asarco smelter in East Helena eliminated a major fish barrier on the Prickly Pear Creek when they recently rebuilt a dam at the smelter that was washed out by a late-May flood.

Asarco agreed with the Lewis and Clark County Conservation District and several state agencies that flood gates on the dam should be left open at the bottom if the dam were to be rebuilt. The dam has caused two major problems on the Prickly Pear: it has allowed sediment to build up behind it and has prevented the upstream migration of spawning trout from the Missouri River system.

The state wasn't convinced that the dam needed to be rebuilt at all, although Asarco contended that the small impoundment it created was necessary to protect the level of ponds from which processing and cooling water for the plant was drawn. In the compromise that allowed the district to issue a "310" permit for construction on the dam, Asarco agreed to leave the existing floodgates open a few inches at the bottom year-round so sediment could continually flush through. Twice a year,

during the spring rainbow trout run and the fall brown trout run, Asarco will open the gates completely, drawing down the impoundment and leaving a free-flowing stream up which the fish can pass.

Asarco also has agreed to compromise with Mother Nature, as it rebuilds the stream channel below the dam, to provide fish habitat and to dissipate the velocity of the water. The channel long ago had been straightened to accomodate the smelter's huge slag pile, but the May flood had cut its own meanders right into that slag pile, washing much of it away. Asarco will move the channel back away from the pile, but will follow the advice of state fisheries experts and hydrologists in designing the shape of the channel. Asarco will give back to the Prickly Pear some of its "natural" look by including several meanders in the channel that should help slow down the water.

The improvements by Asarco are the first major goals achieved under the year-old Prickly Pear Project initiated by the Water Quality Bureau. The bureau just completed a report of all its studies on the creek in the past three years and has turned that report over to the 11 members of the task force. That task force, made up of citizens who volunteered to direct the clean-up efforts on the polluted creek, holds its second meeting this month. Information in the 160-page report should help them set some goals and priorities for the project.

One section of the report--the results of a streambank inventory conducted last fall--was outdated by the May flood which was the worst ever recorded on the Prickly Pear. Many of the streambank features were changed, but the flood confirmed one of the report's conclusions: that streambanks left in their "natural," well-vegetated and unaltered conditions will handle floodwaters with far less damage than those streambanks that have been straightened or stripped of vegetation.

MONEY BEING PUT TO WORK ON MUDDY CREEK

Some real progress is being chalked up on the massive project to stabilize Muddy Creek west of Great Falls.

A $200,000 grant given to the Muddy Creek Project by the Old West Regional Commission last fall has already been spent, mostly on more efficient irrigation sprinklers and buried mainlines in the area, according to John Andrews, project coordinator. He said the rest of the money went toward the concreting of irrigation ditches. Most of Muddy Creek's problems, you remember, stem from the flow of irrigation water into the creek. Andrews said the Old West money has aided 100 farmers--about 25 percent of those living in the project area--which he calls "a very significant number."

"It has given a great impetus to the ASCS companion program (which doubled the Old West grant). We wouldn't have had as many sign-ups in the ASCS program without the Old West money." Andrews says the maximum of $3,500 given to each farmer for projects under the ASCS program just

isn't enough to meet their needs, and he's now searching for more "parallel funding" to keep the farmers signing up.

The Muddy Creek Project received from the state $300,000 in Renewable Resource Development funds and is already putting it to use for some irrigation-water "modeling" on the Greenfield Irrigation District adjacent to the creek. The modeling will tell the landowners how much water is coming in to the area, how much is flowing out, and where the efficiencies can be improved.

The project managers also are trying to lay the groundwork for putting in a gravity sprinkler system that would be "shared" by about 50 farmers and cover about 7,000 acres on the Ashuelot Bench. If enough of the farmers are interested in a group system, then a rural improvement district may be set up to obtain the funds.

AND ONE NOT-SO-FINAL WORD

By Kit Walther
Statewide 208 Coordinator

EPA CUTS 208 PROGRAM - BUT WE'RE STILL ALIVE AND KICKING

Montana's 208 Water Quality Improvement Program is like other programs that were "seeded" with federal money: the time has come to see if it will survive the federal budget cuts and even grow on its own.

For federal Fiscal Year 1982--which begins in October 1981--no more grants will be available for the states' 208 programs. For Montana's 208 Program, the full impact of this cut won't be felt until June 30, 1983. However, planning funds that were once available for conservation districts to use are now committed (mostly to the districts listed in the first articles in this newsletter) and no more will be available for special water-quality projects in the forseeable future.

You may think this means the Statewide 208 Program is dead, or soon will be. But you should remember that the federal government--when it established the program in 1972--never intended to fund it continuously. Congress intended to fund the initial planning stage, so that state programs and data developed in the planning process could be integrated into existing, ongoing resource-management programs.

This is how the 208 Program is to perpetuate itself. And it is now up to the agencies that have involved themselves in the program to keep up the work under their own powers.

Withdrawing the program funds could be construed as a cop-out on the part of the federal government. There are, after all, few things as

close to conservation of land as good water-quality management. But itwas the State of Montana that created its own Conservation District Law, the Hard Rock Mining Law, the Water Quality Act and the conservation agencies--Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Department of State Lands, Department of Health and Environmental Sciences, and so on. The federal grants over the past five years were only to help us plan how to administer these laws and programs more effectively in terms of water-quality management. Now, it is up to us to carry it on.

Should the 208 Program die, it will be because we have not accepted the responsibility that goes with conservation and environmental programs. All of the technical, planning and financial assistance is there if we actively pursue it. Such assistance is available from all kinds of agencies. Implementation money is also available--it's having to justify its use that makes us think it's out of reach, but the money is there if the agencies go about requesting it properly.

In the last session of the legislature, $4.75 million was available for renewable-resource projects. Each applicant for the RRD funds were eligible for up to $400,000. These funds, plus Agricultural Conservation Program funds and others, can provide conservation districts with the money to continue implementing water-quality improvement projects. Of course, these funds are not unlimited and they surely will not fund multi-million dollar projects. But there are literally hundreds of small projects deserving our attention, and if added up could result in continuing water-quality protection for Montana that we can all be proud of.

All this will require keeping people involved and active. If the spirit of the 208 Program is not kept alive on the state and local levels now, Montana's most valuable natural resources--soil and water--and the intent of some well-meaning Congressmen will be in trouble.

Statewide 208 Project
Water Quality Bureau
Dept. of Health & Environmental Sciences
Room A206, Cogswell Building
Helena, Montana 59620

6053

TO:

900 copies of this newsletter were produced at a unit cost of 49¢ per copy, for a total cost of $442 which includes $367 for printing and $75 for distribution.